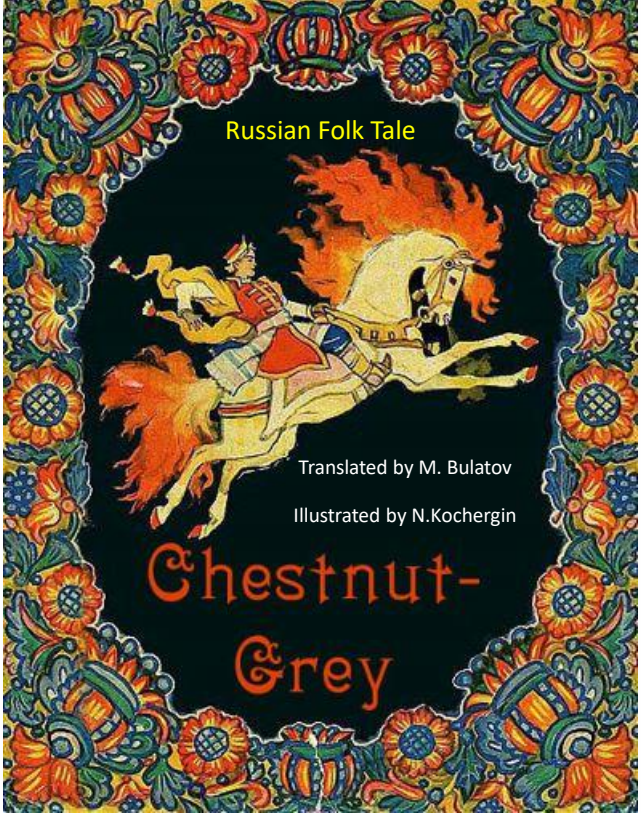

Russian Folk Tale
Translated by M. Bulatov
Illustrated by N.Kochergin
Chestnut-
Grey

Once upon a time there was an old man. He had three sons, the youngest of whom was called Ivan the Fool.

The old man planted wheat in his field. It grew high and strong, but someone took to trampling it.

So the old man said to his sons:

"My dear lads! I want you to take turns guarding the wheat field at night in order to catch the thief."

The first night the eldest son set out to guard the field, but he got sleepy. He climbed up to the hayloft and slept soundly there till morning.

When he came home he said, "I didn't sleep a wink night, but I didn't see any thief."

The second night the middle son went to guard the field and he, too, slept soundly in the hayloft till morning.

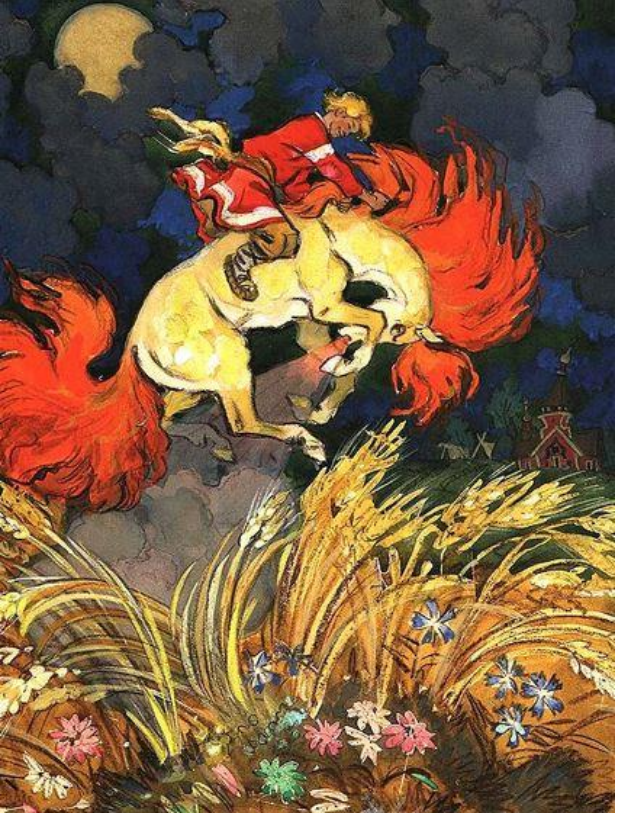
The third night it was Ivan the Fool's turn to guard the field. He put a bun in his pocket, took along a rope and set out. When he came to the field he sat down on a stone. He sat there wide-eyed, munching on his bun and waiting for the thief.

At the stroke of midnight a stallion galloped into the field. Its mane was of silver and gold.

The earth shook beneath its hooves, its nostrils breathed smoke, and flames shot out of its ears.

The stallion began to eat the ears of wheat, and it trampled much more than it ate.

Ivan crept up to the horse and threw the rope over its head. The horse tried to break free, but Ivan jumped onto its back and grabbed hold of its mane. How the horse did kick and buck! How it galloped up and down the field! But it could not shake Ivan off its back!



Then the horse pleaded, "Let me go, Ivan! I promise to help you whenever you need me."

"All right," Ivan said. "I'll let you go. But how will I find you again?"

"You must come to the middle of an open field, whistle through your fingers and yell loudly as you can: 'Chestnut-Grey, hear and obey!' I'll come the minute you call."

Ivan let the horse go, and it promised never to eat or trample the wheat again.

The next morning Ivan came home.

"Well, did you see anything there?" his brothers asked.

"I caught a horse of silver and gold," Ivan said.

"And where is it?"

"Why, it promised never to trample the wheat again, and so I let it go."

His brothers did not believe a word of what he said and laughed heartily.

But from that night on no one trampled the wheat again.

Soon after that the Tsar sent his messengers to every city, town and village with the following announcement:

"Gather ye, noblemen and merchants and simple peasant-folk to see the Tsar's daughter, Elena the Beautiful! She sits at the window of her high tower. He who can jump up to her on his steed and take the precious ring from her finger will marry her!"

On the appointed day the two elder brothers prepared to journey to the Tsar's palace. They were not going there to try their luck, but simply to watch the others. Ivan the Fool pleaded with them saying:

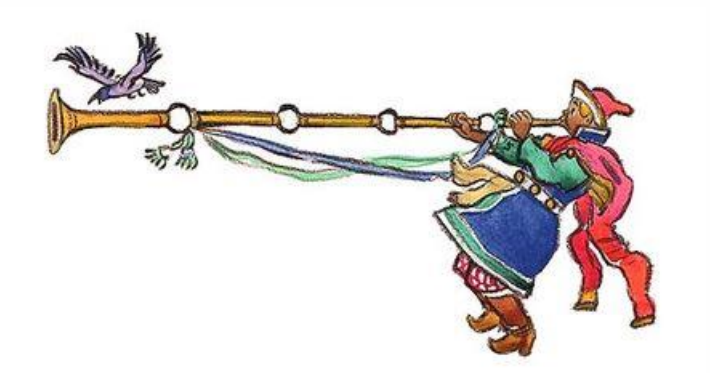
"Oh, brothers, let me have any old horse. I want to see Elena the Beautiful, too!"

"Ha! Listen to the fool!" they said. "Do you want to make the good people laugh? Sit near the fire and rake the ashes!"

When his brothers were gone, Ivan said to their wives:

"Give me a basket, and I'll go gather mushrooms in the forest."

He took a basket and left, pretending that he was going to the forest.



When he came to an open field he tossed the basket under a bush, whistled through his fingers and yelled at the top of his voice: "Chestnut-Grey, hear and obey!"

The earth shook and the stallion galloped up. Its nostrils breathed smoke, and flames shot out of its ears. It stopped dead in its tracks before Ivan. "What do you wish?" it asked.

Ivan told him his story.

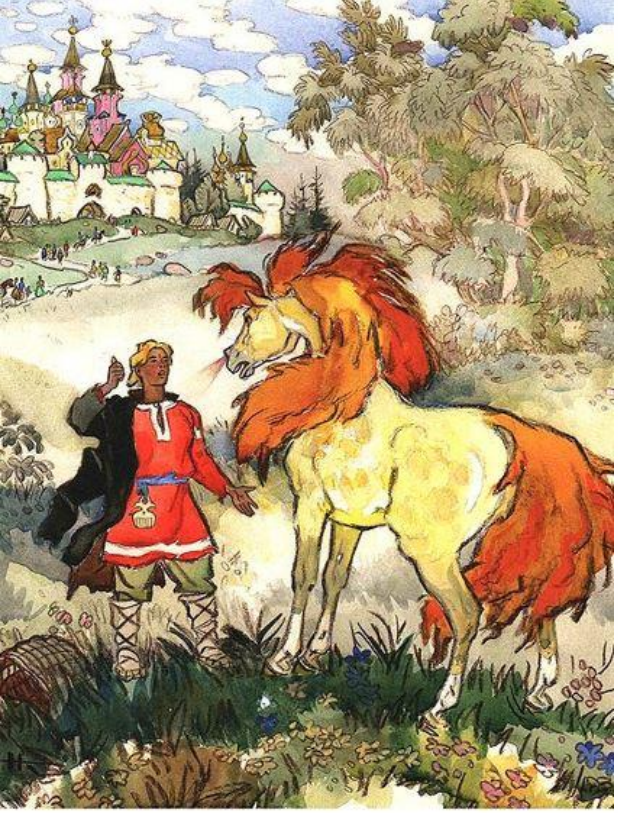
"Well, then, crawl into my right ear and out of my left ear," said the horse.

Ivan crawled into its right ear and out of the left and turned into a noble youth, the likes of which were never seen or heard of before.

He mounted Chestnut-Grey and they both galloped towards the city.

On the way he overtook his brothers and left them behind in a cloud of dust.

Ivan rode into the square before the Tsar's palace. It was crowded with people and there, at the window of her high tower, sat the princess, Elena the Beautiful. On her finger was a lovely sparkling ring. She was the most beautiful maiden in all the land. Everyone gazed at her in wonder, but no one dared to jump up to her window for fear of breaking his neck.



Ivan dug his heels into Chestnut-Grey's sides. The horse snorted, neighed and leaped. But his head was three yards beneath the princess' window.

The people were amazed. Then Ivan turned Chestnut-Grey around and galloped off.

"Who is he? Who is he?" everyone shouted.

By that time Ivan had vanished. They had all seen him ride up, but they hadn't seen which way he had gone.

Ivan rode out of the city, reached the open field, got off his horse, crawled into its left ear and out of its right, turning back into Ivan the Fool. He then let Chestnut-Grey go and headed home. There he sat down by the fire to wait for his brothers' return.

When his brothers came back they told their wives what they had seen in the city. "If you only knew what a fine youth came to the Tsar! We never saw anyone like him before. He nearly reached the princess' window!"

Ivan sat by the fire and laughed. "Brothers, are you sure it wasn't me you saw there?"

"How could such a fool as you be there? Just sit where you are and catch flies!"

"The next day the two elder brothers set out for the city again, and Ivan took his basket and went to gather mushrooms.

When he came into the open field he tossed his basket under a bush, whistled through his fingers and yelled at the top of his voice: "Chestnut-Grey, hear and obey!"

The earth shook and the stallion galloped up. Its nostrils breathed smoke, and flames shot out of its ears. It stopped dead in its tracks before Ivan.

He crawled into the horse's right ear and out of the left and turned into a noble youth again.

He mounted Chestnut-Grey and galloped to the palace. There he saw that the square was even more crowded than on the previous day. Everyone gazed at the beautiful princess, but no one dared to jump up to her window for fear of breaking his neck.

Ivan dug his heels into Chestnut-Grey's sides. The horse snorted, and leaped. But his head was still two yards beneath the princess' window.

Ivan turned Chestnut-Grey around and galloped off. They had all seen him ride up, but they hadn't seen which way he had gone.

He mounted Chestnut-Grey and galloped off to the palace.

When he rode to the high tower he whipped his horse. Chestnut-Grey neighed louder than ever. He struck the ground with his hooves and leaped — and he reached the window!

Ivan kissed the princess' rosy lips and took the precious ring from her finger. Then he turned his horse around and galloped off.

Soon his brothers came home. They told their wives what they had seen in the city. "This time the noble youth reached the princess' window. He kissed her and took the ring from her finger!"

Ivan called to them from behind the chimney:

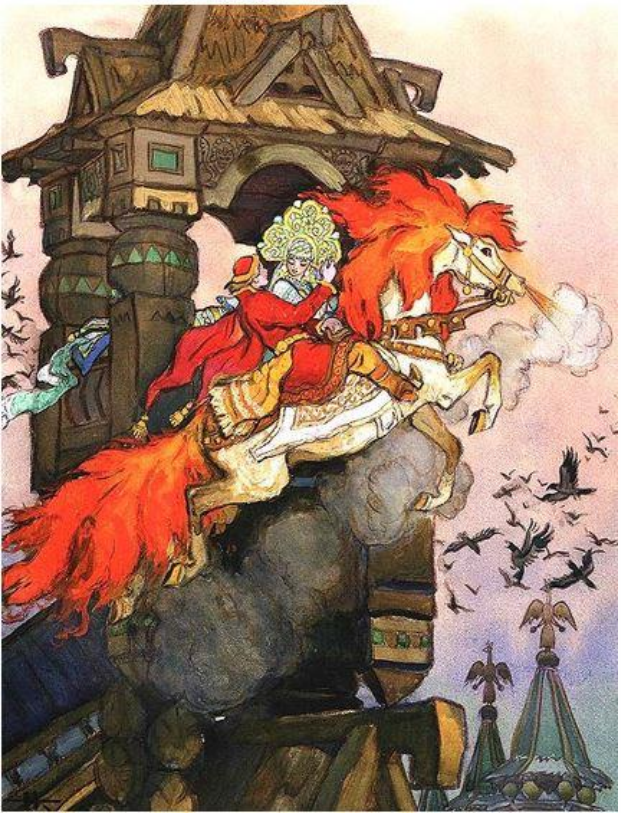
"Brothers, are you sure it wasn't me you saw there?"

"Be still, fool, and don't meddle!"

Ivan decided to have a look at the princess' ring. He unwound the rag. The stone sparkled so it lit up the whole house.

Stop playing with fire, you fool!" his brothers shouted. "You'll burn the house down. It's high time we chased you out altogether!"

Ivan said nothing. Instead, he wound the rag around his hand again.

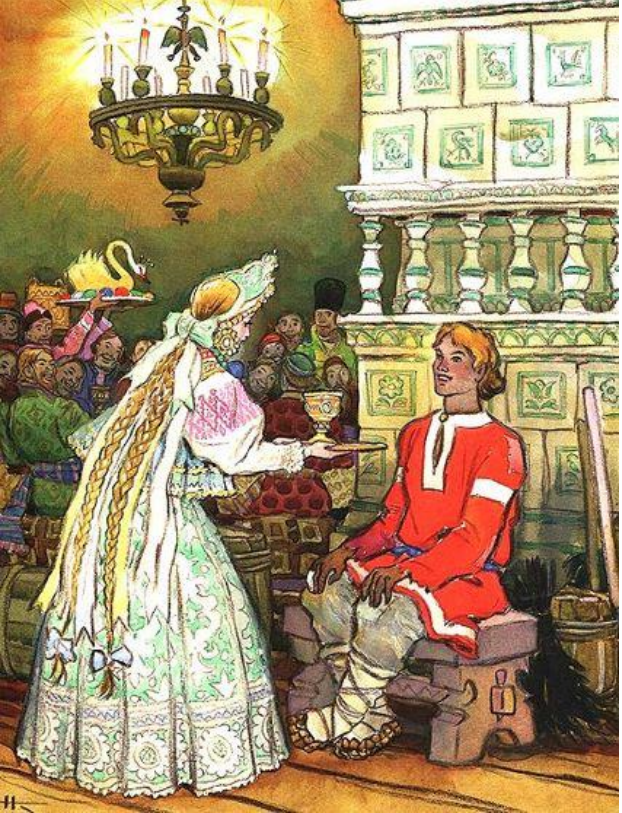


Three days passed. Once again the Tsar sent his messenger over the countryside to call every one of his subjects to a grand feast and see to it that not a single person remained at home. If anyone dared to disobey, the Tsar would have him beheaded!

There was nothing the brothers could do. They had to take Ivan the Fool along to the feast.

When they arrived they were seated at oaken tables covered with embroidered cloths. They ate and drank, and talked. But Ivan found himself a place in a corner behind the stove.

Elena the Beautiful made the rounds of her guests offering each in turn wine and mead. And each time she stopped to see whether anyone might be wearing her treasured ring, for the one who was wearing it was to be her husband.



Nowhere did she see it.

After she had made the rounds of all her guests, she came up to Ivan.

There he was, sitting behind the stove in his tattered clothes. There was a rag wrapped around his hand.

The brothers looked at him and thought: "Humph! The princess is even going to offer wine to our foolish Ivan."

The princess handed Ivan a glass of wine and asked:

"Why is your hand bandaged?"

"I was picking mushrooms in the forest and pricked it on a twig," he answered.

"Take the rag off and show me your hand."

Ivan did as he was told. There on his finger was the princess' treasured ring! How it sparkled and glittered!

The princess was very happy. She took him by the hand and led him up to the Tsar.

"Here is my husband, Father," she said.

Ivan washed and changed his clothes. He was no longer Ivan the Fool now, but a most noble youth.

Without wasting another minute on talk, they celebrated the wedding and went on with their grand feast.

I was there, too. I drank wine and mead, and had a wonderful time.